

Diversity of Buddhism

Differences Between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism

One of the most significant differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism is that Theravada Buddhism focuses on or looks to the earliest Buddhist scriptures only, the Pali canon. New compositions or later additions to the early *sutras* are not allowed or generally recognized.

In contrast, Mahayana Buddhism uses additional new texts, revelations, and teachings and does not rely exclusively on the oldest *sutras* or scriptures. For example, the teachings of The Buddha's own disciples by later writers were developed into new *sutras* and were and are viewed within the Mahayana tradition as equal value as they are seen as having been delivered through the living memory or mind of The Buddha. In addition, as Mahayana Buddhism spread north through Northern Asia (Tibet, China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Mongolia) it incorporated more of the local cultures and customs.

Theravada Buddhism differs from Mahayana Buddhism in more than its exclusive focus on original sutras. There are other significant differences in belief and practice.

- Scriptures are in Pali (Pali Canon) and Pali is used in worship.
- The main *Bodhisattva* is Maitreya.
- *Bodhisattvas* seek enlightenment first before they can help others stuck in *samsara*.
- Greater emphasis is placed on *arhat*—liberation or *nirvana*. Individual effort is seen as more important than the support of the divine.
- Wisdom is a more important virtue than compassion; the individual



Figure 36: Genpo Merzel Roshi, Aen, Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi Roshi Zen Buddhists



Figure 37: Zen Buddhist Monk.

Venerable Hsuan Hua meditating in the lotus position, Hong Kong, 1953.

should gain insights from his own experience, application of knowledge, and critical reasoning, which is weighed against scripture and teachings of wise monks.

- A strong emphasis is placed on monastic practice; monks and nuns have a strong relationship with lay people.
- The Buddha is considered to be human and a supreme teacher rather than a saviour.
- Metaphysics and ritual are not emphasized.
- A meditative approach to the transformation of consciousness is emphasized; meditation is mostly silent-mind and mindfulness meditation, which are of two types, *Samatha*: calming meditation and *Vipassanā*: insight meditation.
- Examples of contemporary expression include
 - Thai Forest Tradition
 - Vipassanā



Figure 38: Zen Buddhism

Zen is a school of Mahayana Buddhism that emerged when Buddhism spread to China and is about 15 centuries old. “Zen Buddhism” may be translated as Meditation Buddhism.

Zen Buddhism has several different names depending on cultural and geographic differences. In China it is called Ch’an Buddhism. Zen is the Japanese version of Ch’an. In Vietnam, Zen is called Thien and in Korea it is Seon.

Characteristics of Mahayana Buddhism include

- Scriptures (*sutras*) are in Sanskrit.
- The Bodhisattva Maitreya and non-historical figures are revered.
- *Bodhisattvas* may delay their realization to stay in *samsara* and help other struggling humans.
- *Bodhisattvas* have greater prominence in the development of one’s consciousness.
- It advocates the notion that individuals should not just seek personal enlightenment but the enlightenment of all beings.
- A broader range of approaches to enlightenment are accepted and a wide range of approaches exist that go beyond meditation and personal disciplines but also include selfless service and working for the benefit of others.

- There is greater emphasis on mantras and chanting, especially in Tibetan Buddhism.
- Monastic tradition exists but lay practice is also valued.
- Examples of contemporary expression of Mahayana Buddhism include
 - Pure Land
 - Zen

In Theravada (Southern) Buddhist countries, the monks (*bhikkhus*) are easily recognized because they wear the characteristic orange robe, have their heads shaven, and go about barefoot. They are given a new name and the robe, and will live according to a code of 227 rules (the *Vinaya*). A monk may decide to disrobe (cease being a monk) at any time.

Bhikkhus live a strict, simple life of meditation, study, and work, with very short hours of sleep and only one main meal a day. They do not own money or any possessions. They help with the important task of teaching and assisting lay people, and conducting ceremonies.

The chart that appears below summarizes some of the most important differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism.

Differences Between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism

	Topic	Theravada Buddhism	Mahayana Buddhism
1	The Buddha	Only the historical Gautama (Sakyamuni) Buddha and past Buddhas are accepted.	Besides Sakyamuni Buddha, other contemporary Buddhas like Amitabha and Medicine Buddha are also very popular.
2	Bodhisattvas	Only Maitreya bodhisattva is accepted.	Avalokitesvara, Mansjuri, Ksitigarbha, and Samanthabhadra are four very well-known <i>bodhisattvas</i> besides Maitreya.
3	Objective of training	Arahant or pacceka-Buddha	<i>Buddhahood</i> (via <i>bodhisattva</i> path)
4	Organization of Buddhist scriptures	The Pali Canon is divided into three baskets (Tipitaka): <i>Vinaya Pitaka</i> of five books, <i>Sutta Pitaka</i> of five collections (many <i>suttas</i>), and <i>Abhidhamma Pitaka</i> of seven books.	The Mahayana Buddhist Canon also consists of <i>Tripitaka</i> of disciplines, discourses (<i>sutras</i>) and <i>dharma</i> analysis. It is usually organized in 12 divisions of topics like cause and conditions and verses. It contains virtually all the <i>Theravada Tipitaka</i> and many <i>sutras</i> that the latter does not have.
5	Concept of <i>Bodhicitta</i>	Main emphasis is self liberation. There is total reliance on one-self to eradicate all defilements.	Besides self liberation, it is important for Mahayana followers to help other sentient beings.

Differences Between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism

6	<i>Trikaya</i> concept	Very limited emphasis on the three bodies of a Buddha. References are mainly on <i>nirmana-kaya</i> and <i>dharmakaya</i> .	Very well-mentioned in Mahayana Buddhism. <i>Sambhoga-kaya</i> or reward/enjoyment body completes the <i>Trikaya</i> concept.
7	Transmission route	Southern transmission: Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Laos and Cambodia, and parts of Southeast Asia	Northern transmission: Tibet, China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, and parts of Southeast Asia.
8	Language of <i>dharm</i> a teaching	<i>Tipitaka</i> is strictly in Pali. <i>Dharma</i> teaching in Pali is supplemented by local language.	Buddhist canon is translated into the local language (except for the five untranslatables), e.g. Tibetan, Chinese, and Japanese. Original language of transmission is Sanskrit.
9	<i>Nirvana</i> (<i>Nibanna</i> in Pali)	No distinction is made between <i>nirvana</i> attained by a Buddha and that of an <i>arahat</i> or <i>pacceka</i> Buddha.	Also known as 'liberation from <i>samsara</i> ,' there are subtle distinctions in the level of attainment for the three situations.
10	Sakyamuni Buddha's disciples	Basically historical disciples, whether <i>arahats</i> or commoners.	A lot of <i>bodhisattvas</i> are introduced by Sakyamuni Buddha. Most of these are not historical figures.
11	Rituals and liturgy	There are some rituals but not heavily emphasized as in Mahayana schools.	Owing to local cultural influences, there is much more emphasis on the use of rituals; e.g. Rituals for the deceased, feeding of <i>Petas</i> , tantric formalities (in Vajrayana).
12	Use of <i>mantras</i> and <i>mudras</i>	Some equivalent in the use of <i>Parittas</i> .	It is heavily practised in the Vajrayana school of Mahayana Buddhism. Other schools also have included some mantras in their daily liturgy.
13	Dying and death aspects	Very little research and knowledge on the process of dying and death. Usually, the dying persons are advised to meditate on impermanence, suffering, and emptiness.	The Vajrayana school is particularly meticulous in these areas. There are many inner and external signs manifested by people before they die. There is heavy stress in doing transference of merit practices in the immediate few weeks following death to assist in the deceased's next rebirth.
14	Bardo	This in-between stage after death and before rebirth is ignored in Theravada school.	All Mahayana schools teach this after death aspect.
15	One meal a day practice	This the norm among Theravada sanghas.	This is a highly respected practice but it is left to the disposition of each individual in the various sanghas.

Differences Between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism

16	Vegetarianism	This aspect is not necessary. In places like Thailand where daily morning rounds are still practised, it is very difficult to insist on the type of food to be donated	Very well observed in all Mahayana schools (except the Tibetans due to the geographical circumstances); however, this aspect is not compulsory.
17	Focus of worship in the temple	There is a simple layout with the image of Sakyamuni Buddha as the focus of worship.	It can be quite elaborate; with a chamber/hall for Sakyamuni Buddha and two disciples, one hall for the three Buddhas (including Amitabha and Medicine Buddha) and one hall for the three key <i>bodhisattvas</i> ; besides the protectors, etc.
18	Schools/sects of the tradition	Following years of attrition, there is one surviving major school reducing the number from as high as 18.	There are eight major (Chinese) schools based on the partial doctrines (<i>sutras</i> , <i>sastras</i> , or <i>vinaya</i>) of the teachings. The four schools inclined towards the practices such as Pure Land/Amitabha, Ch'an, Vajrayana, and Vinaya (not for lay people) are more popular than the philosophy-based schools like Tien Tai, Avamtsaka, Yogacara, and Madhyamika.
19	Non Buddhist influences	Mainly pre-Buddhism Indian/Brahmin influences. Many terms like <i>karma</i> , <i>sangha</i> , etc. were prevailing terms during Sakyamuni Buddha's lifetime. References were made from the <i>Vedas</i> and <i>Upanishads</i> .	In the course of integration and adoption by the people in other civilizations, there were heavy mutual influences. In China, both Confucianism and Taoism exerted some influence on Buddhism which in turn had an impact on the indigenous beliefs. This scenario was repeated in Japan and Tibet.
20	Buddha nature	Absent from the teachings of Theravada tradition.	Heavily stressed, particularly by schools inclined practices.

Source: Differences Between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, Snapshots of Buddhism: Summaries of Teachings and Topics (www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/snapshot02.htm) by Buddhanet, compiled by Tan Swee Eng. Used with permission.

Schools and Branches of Buddhism

The chart that follows provides an overview of the three main branches of Buddhism and the sects or schools associated with each.

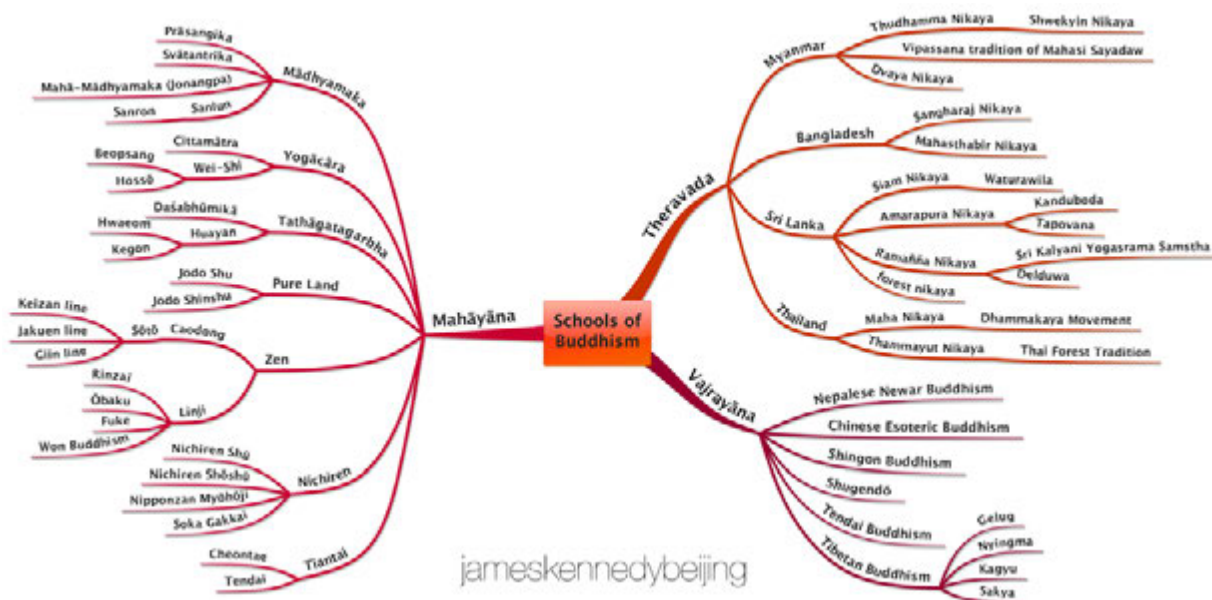


Figure 39: Evolutionary chart showing how Buddhism branched out from three original branches

Significant Persons/Founders

Beyond Gautama (the given name of the historical Buddha), there are a number of important historical and contemporary figures.

Historical Figures

- **Maya Devi** is the mother of Siddhartha Gautama. She is believed to have died seven days after giving birth to him. She was reborn to a heavenly realm that The Buddha went to after enlightenment to teach her higher psychological-scientific teachings (*Abhidhamma*).
- **Tara** (aka. Arya Tara, White Tara, or Jetsun Dolma in Tibetan Buddhism) is an important Buddhist figure. She is a female *bodhisattva* in Mahayana Buddhism, and a female Buddha in Vajrayana Buddhism. She is the mother of liberation, and represents the virtues of success in work and achievements.
- **Sariputta (Sariputra)** was the first chief male disciple of the Buddha. He was known for his caring, humility, patience, and especially his wisdom. He

learned the higher teachings from The Buddha and was foremost in explaining it.

- **Maha Pajapati Gotami** was the aunt and step-mother of the Buddha. She became the first nun in Buddhism and became fully enlightened (*arahant*).
- **Khema** was one of the wives of King Bimbisara and was very beautiful. One day, The Buddha explained impermanence to her in such a way to show her that the beauty would not last. Khema practiced and became enlightened and then decided to become a nun. She penetrated to the truth very quickly and was the chief nun during the time of Buddha.
- **Ananda** was The Buddha's cousin and one of his primary disciples. He memorized and recited the Buddha's teachings, and so was known as the *Dhammabhandagarika* (treasurer of the teachings).
- **Aśoka**, the Mauryan Emperor Aśoka (273–232 BCE), was perhaps the most significant historical figure in the spread of Buddhism from India throughout Asia. He converted to Buddhism after his bloody conquest of the territory of Kalinga (modern Orissa) in eastern India during the Kalinga War. Encountering Buddhist monks and regretting the horrors and misery brought about by the war, Aśoka renounced violence to replace the misery caused by war with respect and dignity for all humanity. He promoted the faith by building stupas and pillars urging, among other things, respect of all animal life and encouraging people to follow the *Dharma*. Aśoka was also responsible for the development of his empire and built roads, hospitals, rest houses, universities, and irrigation systems around the country. He treated his subjects as equals regardless of their religion, politics, or caste. (Pew Research Center)
- **Sanghamitta** was the daughter of King Ashoka. She was a nun who spread the Order to Sri Lanka and brought with her a sapling from the original



Figure 40: A happy Buddha and little ones. Budai; Hotei or Pu-Ta; Images and statues of Budai are often mistaken for Gautama Buddha himself; and thus often nicknamed the “Fat Buddha”; The Budai is a semi-historical Chinese monk who is venerated as deity in Chinese and Japanese Buddhist traditions. He is supposed to have lived around the 10th century in the Wuyue kingdom. Hotei is one of Japan's Seven Lucky Gods. Commonly depicted bald; smiling; with a big belly; bulging ears; and a large sack and fan in his hands. His nickname in Chinese is the “Laughing Buddha”.

Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya. This marked one of the key moments in the spread of Buddhism outside of India.

- **Shinran** (1173–1263) is known as the founder of the True Pure Land School of Japanese Buddhism. He was a disciple of Honen (Jodo School), he believed in the doctrine of salvation by faith in Amitabha Buddha and that the recitation of Amitabha's name could be sufficient to achieve the Pure Land if done with a pure heart. He was an advocate for the marriage of priests and popularized congregational worship. His teachings had significant impact in Japan and to a certain extent Korea.
- **Dogen** (1200–1253) is the Japanese Founder of Soto Zen, the largest Zen school of Buddhism in Japan. Dogen studied in China with the Ts'ao Tung (Ch'an) school for four years before returning in 1227 to Japan. He is recognized as the sole founder of the Japanese school of Soto Zen. Dogen avoided dealing with the Royal Court and retired to the mountains where he established Eihei-ji temple, near Fukui.
- **Rev. Senju Sasaki** was the first resident minister of the mother temple of the Jodo Shinshu temple established in Vancouver in 1905. He was sent by the Nishi Hongwanji Temple of Kyoto, Japan, the mother temple of the Jodo Shinshu (True Pure Land) sect of Buddhism.

The diversity of Buddhism and the various approaches and schools means that there are many significant contemporary figures within Buddhism. A few of the more notable international and Canadian Buddhist leaders and masters follow.

- **Mahasi Sayadaw** (Ven. U Sobhana) is best known for reviving Theravada Vipassanā meditation. In 1949, on the invitation of the Prime Minister, U Nu, of Burma, Mahasi Sayadaw taught at the Sasana Yeiktha (Meditation Centre) in Rangoon. Shortly thereafter, similar meditation centres were established in many parts of the country with Mahasi-trained members of the Sangha as meditation teachers. Such centres were opened not only in Burma but also in neighbouring Theravada countries like Thailand and Sri Lanka.
- **Rahula, Ven. Walpola** is a Sri Lankan scholar monk who criticized some popular Buddhist practices and took a special interest in social and economic matters. He supported the struggle for political freedom, worked with Miss I.B. Horner of the Pali Text Society, and lectured widely in the USA and Japan.
- **Suzuki, D.T.** is a Japanese Buddhist scholar and one of the most well-known modern interpreters of Zen in the West. He was a lay student of Master Shaku Soen (Soyen) of the Engaku Temple in Kamakura (Japan) and underwent Zen training there. He focused primarily on the intellectual interpretation of Zen teachings. His work had significant impact on the dissemination of Zen Buddhism in the West.
- **Thich Nhat Hanh** was born Nguyen Xuan Bao in 1926 in Vietnam but was exiled in 1975. He resided in Plum Village in Southwest France. Thich Nhat Hanh was a spiritual leader, poet, author, and peace activist. He played a major role in bringing Buddhism to the West and founded six monasteries,

dozens of practice centres, and over 1,000 sanghas—local mindfulness practice communities. Thich Nhat Hanh lobbied against the Vietnam War and led the Buddhist delegation at the Paris Peace Talks in 1969.

- **Dalai Lama** is currently Tenzin Gyatso. He is likely one of most well-known Buddhists alive. At age two he was identified as being the reincarnation of the 13th Dalai Lama, Thubten Gyatso. He was renamed Tenzin Gyatso and proclaimed the 14th Dalai Lama in 1937. Dalai Lamas are believed to be the reincarnation of Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion and the patron saint of Tibet. The Dali Lama was educated in the Nalanda Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

The Dalai Lama was the political leader of the Tibetan Government that was exiled to India in 1954 following the 1950 invasion of Tibet by China. Until 2011, the Dalai Lama, following a centuries-old Tibetan tradition, was both the spiritual and political leader of Tibet. Since then, the Dalai Lama remains the spiritual leader but the political leader is now a democratically elected person.

In 1989, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his non-violent struggle for the liberation of Tibet. He has consistently advocated policies of non-violence, even in the face of extreme aggression. He also became the first Nobel Laureate to be recognized for his concern for global environmental problems.

- **Matthieu Ricard** is a Buddhist monk of Quebecois origins who went from a scientific career as a molecular biologist in France to the study of Buddhism in the Himalayas over 40 years ago. He has been the French interpreter for the Dalai Lama since 1989. Ricard is an international bestselling author and photographer



Figure 41: Dali Lama at the University of Maryland May 7, 2013